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Torah-Based Community Organizing and Development
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FESTIVALS CELEBRATE OUR CONNECTION

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Many congregations have a large proportion of members whose attendance at services is mostly limited to the High Holy Days. We have heard from some of these congregants that, when they think of synagogue services, the image that comes to mind is one of interminable boredom, the minutes dragging by like hours. And, of course, the alternatives—a party or get-together with friends, a meal at a first-class restaurant, a good movie or play, or an exciting concert or sporting event—are infinitely more attractive to them.

While obviously there is no easy, quick, or simple solution to this situation, we believe that it may be helpful to encourage a change in perspective, planning, and programming related to the *shalosh regalim*, the pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—which may be a challenging but not insurmountable goal.

The three festivals once were observed at the Temple in Jerusalem as joyous, national celebrations. Unfortunately, most of the conditions that made them so are almost entirely outside of our experience now.

Our ancestors were living an agrarian life, the majority of them were farmers, and they had an acute awareness that forces far beyond them (e.g., the weather) controlled their destiny. But unlike them, we are sufficiently insulated from ordinary natural forces—floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes are, of course, exceptional—by a variety of public and private "safety nets"; so typically we imagine ourselves to be completely in control of our own destiny. Speaking sociologically, we have reified the world in which we live: it seems to maintain itself independent of human or even divine effort. So, of course, mostly we don't experience any compelling need to acknowledge God's role in our welfare.

Our forebears accepted Torah as authoritative, whether or not they lived up to its requirements, because they understood that Torah's requirements were linked to practical consequences in the history of the people. They knew this by virtue of their Torah literacy, because they knew the Torah firsthand. But unlike them, the majority of us have purposively kept ourselves ignorant of Torah. We're reminded of a community organizer we worked with many years ago—a secular, religiously uneducated Jew—who once accused us of being "religious fanatics." Our response to him was that, "we're happy to talk at length about what you believe to be our fanaticism, provided you're equally open to talk about your ignorance of Judaism." The point is that many of us, not really knowing what Torah says, don't see that there are practical consequences for living up to or failing to live up to its teachings.

Maybe the most dramatic difference between us and those who went up to the Temple for the festivals in ancient times is that they not only understood the path of Torah, but also that the consequences for keeping on it were gauged to the actions of a whole community, even to a people and a nation. Unlike us, their lives were not privatized; they didn't entertain the arrogant fiction that they could achieve *shalom*, completeness or wholeness of life, independent of their community and people.

But withal there is something of pivotal significance that we have in common with our forbears in ancient Israel. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, their life was highly centralized and integrated. Since they resided in relatively close proximity, they were dependent on one another in myriad ways, and they had a great many experiences and understandings in common. Thus, to maintain their unity of purpose and practical commitment to living according to the Torah was far less complicated than it otherwise might have been.

After they entered and settled the land, however, maintaining the spiritual life of the people became much more complicated. They were then decentralized in their places of dwelling and worship, so unity of purpose and commitment to Torah became much more difficult to maintain. They had moved away from the unified, purposive life they shared in the wilderness to the decentralized, more fragmented life in the land of Israel.

Initially, most of our people came to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as immigrants, residing first in overcrowded urban ghettos. Notwithstanding all the horrors of that life—Moshe's mother spent all of her days trying to

escape the images of poverty and filth there that she knew as a child—these concentrations of Jews mostly shared unity of purpose and commitment to Torah.

After World War II, however, many of our families began to move away from the enclaves of Jewish life on the eastern seaboard, abandoning Jewish neighborhoods in cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. As a consequence, many of us, their second and third-generation offspring, have spent our lives in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas of the country, without the educational, religious, and cultural advantages of participating in a unified, purposive Jewish community. So we find ourselves in some ways like the Jews of ancient Israel, dispersed and, for the most part, religiously dispossessed throughout the land.

These demographic changes are associated with circumstances, in which we find ourselves, like our forebears, subject to forces far beyond our control. Instead of natural forces, however, they are social, political, and economic tensions that roil our lives and threaten the safety and security of our families. And to the extraordinary extent that our urban life styles are much more privatized, carried on outside of actively supportive community, typically limited to a small circle of close relatives and friends, we are often caught up in depression and despair because of our powerlessness.

What insight does Torah give us toward possibly remedying this situation?

Deuteronomy 16:16 reads: "Three times in a year shall all your males appear before Adonai your God in the place which He shall choose: on the feast of unleavened bread [Passover], and on the feast of weeks [Shavuot], and on the feast of tabernacles [Sukkot]. . . ." The obligation to go up to the Temple three times a year was binding only on adult males, but women and children often went too.

The *shalosh regalim* were foreshadowed when Moses first went to Pharaoh and proclaimed, "Thus says God, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to me in the wilderness." (Exodus 5:1) Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) gives us an insightful understanding of the fully developed festival practice. According to Rabbi Hirsch, the spiritual purpose of any *chag* (חַג) or festival may be understood from the root of the word, ח-ג-ג, which means to form a circle. The essence of the circular aspect is *not* that the festival occurs cyclically every year, but that, ". . . a Festival is called a חַג because the celebrants form a circle round the center to which God has gathered them as a community about Him."

Rabbi Hirsch goes on to say that, ". . .three times in the year all the individual members of the nation are to appear out of all isolation personally before the presence of the One God of the nation, in the circle around the one common Sanctuary, and thereby become *conscious of each one being in connection with all the others, with God, and with His Torah*." (Our emphasis.)

This *mitzvah* is no longer binding because the Temple was destroyed, but it is still relevant to us, since the rabbis taught that prayer in the synagogue has taken the place of sacrifice. So we might ask ourselves why it would have been important for all able-bodied men and many women and children to see and let themselves be seen, all together, several times a year in the palpable presence of God. What might have been the effect on their day-to-day life when they returned to their various towns and villages?

Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot are meant to be uniquely meaningful, spiritually stimulating and fulfilling festivals. So what might be our experience if we actively planned and prepared programs for all of our congregation's members to come together at these three festivals with a common consciousness to joyously celebrate our connection with one another, with the Jewish people, with Torah, and with God?

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